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ABSTRACT

The contemporary preoccupation with academic achievement may overlook the importance of preserving students' self-worth. Rankings of students are too often linked to judgments of moral worth; instead, the promotion of equal dignity in four areas (material well-being, individuality, communal affiliation, and wholeness) must form the broad goals of education. Even the pursuit of excellence can ultimately fail when human needs are ignored and only evidence of achievement is emphasized--when school standards do not actually reflect mastery of skills, when curriculum is narrow and self-serving, when limited resources are devoted to the gifted only, or when social responsibility is valued below individual achievement. Policy-makers at all levels can minimize these destructive effects by promoting diverse forms of competence, providing support services for slow learners, encouraging cooperative activities in schools, integrating academic disciplines and spheres of school and community life, and including parents and students in decisions affecting school policy and procedure. (JW)

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Human Dignity and Excellence in Education: Guidelines for Curriculum Policy

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I. The Problem

As school staffs, school boards, state and Federal agencies consider recommendations from several recent reports on how to achieve excellence in education (e.g., National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Adler, 1982; Boyer, 1983; Twentieth Century Fund, 1983; Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, 1983; The College Board, 1983; National Science Board Commission, 1983), observers notice the greatest spurt of national interest in schools since the 1957 launching of Sputnik, and they urge educators to seize the opportunity for school reform before it slips away. Revitalized public interest in schools should be applauded, and serious thought should be given to whether particular policies (e.g., career ladders for teachers, requiring three years of high school science, competency tests for high school diplomas) are likely to enhance student achievement. It is not our purpose here to examine the probable effectiveness of specific measures for boosting academic achievement--these issues will receive full deliberation elsewhere. Instead, we view the contemporary preoccupation with academic achievement within a broader conception of the purposes of public education, we explain how the current movement for excellence can threaten the dignity of many students it presumes to serve, and we suggest guidelines to minimize the potential assault on the dignity students who fail to meet new standards.

Much of the analysis is relevant to curriculum in both elementary and secondary schooling, but our major concern is the press for academic rigor in comprehensive public high schools. The discussion centers largely on curriculum standards emerging from current reports rather than recommendations for upgrading the quality of teachers, funding by

local, state and Federal agencies, or other significant issues. We speak to policy-makers at no single level such as teacher, principal, board member or legislator, but offer an analysis hopefully relevant for anyone reflecting upon policies to raise standards of excellence in school curriculum.

II. Human Dignity

If we ask why particular policy goals such as increasing test scores, or offering expanded instruction in math and science should be pursued, the discussion will ultimately refer to broader purposes of education. These might emerge in phrases such as individual fulfillment and growth, national economic interests, or world peace and security. Without developing a philosophical defense, we wish to affirm here that the most fundamental educational goal of public education in a democracy should be the promotion of equal human dignity for all students. Precise interpretations of this ideal have been disputed for years, but a strong case can be made for four criteria to define human dignity more specifically.

In short, persons may be considered to live in dignity to the extent that they experience material well-being, individuality, social attachment, and integration.[1] It is possible to construe these criteria, explained below, in terms of different hierarchies, and each might be considered the most fundamental component of dignity from which others are derived. We avoid those issues here and regard these criteria of equal importance. Disagreement persists on the appropriate role of public schools in promoting each of these, but both supporters and critics of the schools strive for these conditions.

Material well-being. All persons deserve access to food, clothing, shelter, health care, and security from physical harm by others. What is considered a minimal or reasonable level of material well-being is problemmatic, especially in affluent societies where minimum necessities for survival are almost universally available, but where disparities in personal income, wealth, and power create vast differences in persons' opportunities to partake of goods and services considered necessary for the "good life." In the US, formal schooling enhances material well-being, because the economic system allocates personal income partly in proportion to attainment of educational credentials.[2]

Since material well-being is a basic condition of dignity to which all persons are equally entitled, a society that bases material well-being upon the accumulation of educational credentials will face a serious problem: it cannot justly deny material well-being to persons who fail to attain the credentials. This puts tremendous pressure on schools to make credentials equally available to all students, regardless of ability or motivation in the subjects of formal schooling. Such pressure creates a crisis (reflected in contemporary debate on equality and excellence) in the definition of standards on which students are admitted into schools and the standards on which the credentials will be awarded.

Apart from the equity question, the promotion of education as instrumental to the accumulation of income corrupts the pursuit of excellence itself, because those forms of knowledge and human mastery which maximize income will be favored over other forms. Societies which guarantee material well-being more equally to all, regardless of the

attainment of educational credentials, would be expected to minimize such problems.

Individuality. The rights to express one's authentic self, to individual choice, and to self determination have been pronounced repeatedly, especially in Western societies, as critical to human dignity. We summarize these as the ideal of individuality which signifies liberty for individuals to express ideas, interests, values, personality and temperament that may differ from other persons and from dominant social norms.[3] Individuality should be viewed not as total transcendence or emancipation from society but more as a continuing struggle of individuals to differentiate themselves from one another and from dominant social forces. Given the facts of human diversity, along with the principle of respect for individuality, a doctrine of social tolerance has emerged that recommends peaceful coexistence among diverse religions, political attitudes, family structures, vocations, personal life styles. An aspect of individuality most relevant to education is the right to develop personal competence consistent with individual capabilities and interests.[4] Schools are often criticized for failing to respond to unique student interests or learning styles, but most claim to offer students a variety of learning opportunities to develop unique interests and to enhance personal choice.

Social attachment. Just as persons deserve individual liberty, they also require affiliative bonds, that is, attachments to persons and groups, in friendships, families, associations such as churches, neighborhoods, political organizations, and ethnic communities. Personal attachments offer special opportunities for caring, intimacy, play, and collective attachments permit affiliation with broader

traditions or causes that connect individuals to the larger human community.

Modern conceptions of individuality often neglect the significance of personal and collective attachments. Historically, human liberty has been construed largely as the right of groups, not individuals, to pursue a collective destiny (e.g., Puritans, Blacks, labor unions, independence for colonial territories), and collective struggles have defined the personal identity of individuals.[5] The pursuit of collective interests may at times restrict freedom and choice for individuals within the collective (requiring, for example, conformity in attitudes toward consumption, child-rearing, or investment in the group struggle). Within the group, however, individual dignity itself is defined in part through overriding goals of the collective. In this sense, group limits on personal autonomy are not seen as violations of liberty or dignity.

The importance of social attachment may be most apparent for groups struggling against onslaughts from dominant culture; for example, racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, women, working class organizations. However, personal and collective social attachments are critical to the dignity of all. Schools make some effort to legitimate and reinforce social attachment, for example, programs of ethnic studies, rallies for school sponsored athletics, activities in support of local community projects or acts of national patriotism, and the rhetoric of civics education stresses loyal exercise of social responsibility. In general, however, schools' emphasis on individual achievement, and their main function of assimilating, rather than

affirming diverse cultural and political traditions, precludes active promotion of this dimension of human dignity.

Integration. This final condition of dignity may be considered the opposite of alienation. It signifies a human need for connectedness, relatedness, engagement, as opposed to fragmentation, separation, detachment.[6] To live in dignity we must be able to perceive some order, sequence, continuity in our experiences and in the world of knowledge itself, and we must participate or engage in the quest for integrated experience. To the extent that schooling presents a fragmented set of subjects, builds barriers between experience in school and the world beyond, and reinforces in students a detached, going-through-the motions approach to learning, instead of active involvement, it violates the human quest for integrated experience.

Paradoxically, the search for order and integration through learning requires on the one hand a differentiation of self from experience, a degree of analytic detachment, but on the other, this individuation must be pursued with effort and engagement in the world. Promoting integration, therefore, is not tantamount to eliminating differentiation (differences between subjects of inquiry such as math and literature cannot be denied) nor to producing an oversimplified synthesis of human experience. The challenge is to arrange conditions of learning so that students can critically search for connections among worlds of formal knowledge and their own experiences.

Public schooling in the US is commonly defended for its presumed contribution to students' material well-being and to individual choice in career and leisure interests. Social attachment to the national

political-economic system is reinforced, but attachment to families, voluntary collective efforts, religious and ethnic traditions receives only slight support and in many cases is undermined by school practices. In the daily life of students, integration is perhaps the least realized of the four ideals, because subjects are taught in a fragmented scheme that alienates students from many of their personal experiences.

Whether a system of public schooling is capable of serving all aspects of human dignity is, of course, debatable. Contemporary critics observe that public schools have been asked to do too much, to serve too many social functions. Our purpose in reviewing criteria for dignity is not to suggest that schools create programs aimed systematically toward each of the four dimensions. Schools, like other public institutions, have missions more specifically defined than the promotion of dignity (e.g., literacy training, custodial care of children, maintenance of a credentialing system). At a minimum however, they should operate in ways that avoid assaults to the dignity of people. Criteria for dignity constitute a normative backdrop or screen against which the more apparent functions of schools (e.g., teaching of math) must be evaluated, and such evaluations must be responsive to characteristics of the diverse humans whom schools claim to serve.

III. Human Diversity

Consider the well-recognized fact that individuals differ on several dimensions including age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, material wealth, physical health, family structure, personality and temperament, styles and amount of time taken to learn various forms of competence, general systems of language and thought, specific attitudes

dealing with politics, interpersonal relations, aesthetics, personal aspiration, and, of course, education.[7] This enormous variation affects both the way we conceptualize human dignity and the dilemmas we face in working toward it. Disparities in wealth, health and power, for example, dramatize the issue of material well-being. Centralized institutions trying to manage large masses of people are continuously challenged to respond to differences in individual talents and personalities. Diversity in collective traditions raises issues of political and economic control. Division of labor and individual mobility in modern life lead to diversity in attitudes and life styles that can disrupt patterns of social attachment and threaten integration.

Instead of dwelling on variation, one might of course emphasize human commonalities or shared physical features, developmental needs, common sources of hope and struggle. We focus on diversity here, not because it is a more significant fact than commonality, but because it is so apparent to teachers and policy makers trying to establish practices for large groups of students. Policy-makers and practicing educators are continually perplexed about how to respond to the enormous variation among students, parents or other constituencies.[8]

Diversity can be viewed negatively as an unwelcome nuisance, a costly professional and social misfortune, but also positively as enriching the human condition and stimulating personal and social growth. We construe human diversity neither as a negative obstacle to overcome nor as a virtue always to be celebrated. We wish to suggest only that whenever people, in an effort to "educate," intervene deliberately in the lives of others, whether in the spirit of training and management or of shared growth and empowerment, it is instructive to

ask, "In what ways am I trying to encourage people to become more alike and in what ways am I promoting diversity?"

Differences between students are often described with constructs that imply a hierarchical ranking from positive to negative: high test scores are more desirable than low test scores; good health is better than poor health; active, interested students are preferred to passive, uninterested ones. Students differ markedly in ability, motivation and achievement in many areas (language, mathematics, physical coordination, critical thinking, social participation), and many differences are interpreted as scales that distinguish between high quality versus low quality performance. While considerable variation within ranked categories is inevitable (some students will always demonstrate a higher level of a characteristic than others), the educational goal is usually to help all students approach the high end of a scale. In this sense educators want all students to become alike, i.e., to achieve at the positive end of a ranked scale.

Human differences can also be described without an implied sense of ranking: Ramon wants to work with cars, but Sue wants to be a lawyer; Tanya is the class comedian, and Kwame is the serious leader; Amy works best by herself, but Tom needs to study in a group; blacks and whites in the school want different music at the dances. Comprehensive public high schools attempt to offer coursework, sports, and activities so that students who differ in background and interests can pursue diverse aspirations. The rhetoric of liberal tolerance affirms equal respect for diverse vocations and avocations and suggests that a sense of ranking among particular human activities would be inappropriate. In this sense educators claim that diversity in interests, political views,

cultural heritages is healthy, and that education should develop and preserve differences among students rather than to make them alike.

The ideal of human dignity is grounded in the imperative that all persons are equally worthy from a moral point of view, i.e., all are equally deserving of the four aspects of dignity. This suggests the need for at least two responses to the range of human diversity just described: A) To the extent that individuals differ on dimensions considered appropriate for ranking (e.g., skill in typing, soccer, or speaking a foreign language), their levels of achievement should not determine their sense of moral worth or their right to equal dignity. B) To minimize the dangers of inequality in the right to dignity, differences among people (e.g., in race, religion, gender, interests, etc.) should be interpreted on unranked dimensions whenever possible. Unfortunately, society and the schools frequently violate each of these principles. Those who succeed in the ranked dimensions of achievement are frequently regarded as "better" in a moral sense, and are disproportionately rewarded with wealth and opportunities for individual choice. Further, the rhetoric which affirms equality of worth among pluralistic human activities is betrayed by a social structure in which some vocations, avocations and life styles reap far more rewards of income status and power than others.

Of course, all societies establish dominant norms governing social interaction, language, economic rewards, and legitimate knowledge. The norms tend to define dimensions on which humans are judged (e.g., by emphasizing how well you read or how assertive you are in the marketplace). Societies often deny material resources, opportunities, and communicate a sense of inferior worth to the "failures" or

"deviants" who diverge too far from the norms. The facts of human diversity, coupled with society's persistent attempts to enforce particular norms, create serious problems if a society professes commitment to equal dignity for all.

In noticing differences among students, it is often important to ask about the extent to which individual differences are associated with students' social background, and especially with membership in groups defined by race, gender, ethnicity, social class. Sensitivity to possible connections between individual and group characteristics is important for two main reasons. First, it can lead to more parsimonious explanations of individual differences, showing that large numbers of students may face certain issues in common and require, therefore, common types of educational response. For example, Ogbu's analysis (1978) of caste-like minorities explains how low-income Black students are likely to perceive lower rewards for devoting effort to schooling than immigrant Asian minorities. Similarly, knowledge of working class conceptions of white collar professional work (e.g., Willis, 1977) help to explain why many students fail to thirst for academic knowledge. Awareness of such cultural influences permits educators to view individual differences within a pattern of shared characteristics. Programs designed with shared cultural roots in mind help educators to avoid on the one hand, the unworkable delusion that all students are alike, and on the other the impractical notion that students are so different that each must be treated in a novel, unique way.

A second reason to search for the social background and group membership in which students' differences may be grounded is to demonstrate respect for cultural diversity, or to avoid unjust

discrimination against certain groups. If native American students are reluctant to participate individually in class, because they don't want to show disrespect for peers, the teacher aware of Indian emphasis on cooperation instead of competition, can offer a more sensitive response than a teacher who sees this simply as a deficiency in the individual student. A teacher who understands how socialization has discouraged women from pursuing careers in science may respond in a special way to women in a biology course, rather than assume that an apparent lack of aspiration in the subject is simply a matter of individual differences. A commitment to dignity demands not only that various group traditions be respected, but that in the very act of describing differences between people, we search for ways in which individual variation is associated with variation between groups. In trying to comprehend students' cultural background, much care must be taken to avoid stereotypical conclusions and to distinguish between cultural commonalities and individuals' unique adaptations to them.

Having explained the ideal of human dignity as the fundamental goal of education, and having discussed ways in which the facts of human diversity and social hegemony affect this quest, we turn next to an examination of the concept of excellence.

IV. Excellence: Uses and Abuses

If excellence is understood to represent human performance that meets standards of high quality, the pursuit of excellence can hardly be questioned; the very concept of education implies a sense of striving for advanced forms of knowledge and competence. Advanced knowledge and competence could ideally serve each dimension of dignity--by helping us

cope with issues of material survival, by providing opportunities for self-definition through the development of competence suited to individual interests, by teaching us about constructive forms of social attachment, and by assisting us to make sense of experience in an integrated fashion. In examining the ways in which excellence itself is interpreted and used, however, we find several ways in which the ideal may be diverted from the service of human dignity.

A. Standards

Excellence implies high standards of quality, but how are the standards to be defined? Discourse about standards for student achievement includes two main themes. First is the theme of distinction or exceptional human accomplishment. In noticing excellence in music, athletics, craftsmanship, or scientific research, we often pay special attention to exceptional instances of performance, those produced largely by people at the top within a ranked field. These exemplars help to define the meaning of "outstanding work." Schools may emphasize the importance of all students striving to achieve distinction in writing, wood working or computer programming, but by definition, standards of distinction are achieved only rarely, by a small proportion of the population. School awards for the most outstanding students and programs for the gifted and talented illustrate this dimension of excellence.

Excellence is also used to mean achievement of standards considered appropriate for large portions of a population. Correct spelling and punctuation, knowledge of the basic structure of government, mastery of fundamentals in mathematics or science, and the construction of a logical argument are examples of standards which any student might be

expected to achieve. School competency tests or the proposal of The College Board (1983) reflect standards of this sort. These are promulgated on the assumption that they represent minimal levels of acceptable achievement expected of most persons. These can be called standards of common adequacy. Standards of common adequacy may be applied to individuals within particular categories (e.g., collegebound students, accountants, teachers, welders, or musicians), or to the population at large. In either case, they differ from standards of distinction, because it is assumed that large proportions of a relevant group can and should master them.

Curriculum policy aimed toward distinction must face the problem of the increasingly limited proportion of the population who will meet the standards, and what to do about the large proportion (say 80%) who may never achieve distinction in anything. Policy aimed at elevating standards of common adequacy must face the problem of setting standards high enough to represent meaningful increases in quality, but low enough so that most persons in a relevant population can master them.

Establishing standards for distinction and for common adequacy, however, both involve issues in the selection of content and the determination of baselines. The content questions are "Which fields to include in the curriculum?" "Which should be required of all students?" "Which should be offered on an optional basis?" Controversies over the relative attention given to basic literacy skills, academic subjects, vocational fields, the arts, athletics, practical life skills (e.g., drivers' education, sex education, human relations, cooking, health) illustrate problems in specifying the fields of human mastery for which to promote excellence.

If excellence as distinction is to be pursued, there ought to be exemplars of truly outstanding adult accomplishment for students to emulate. Courses in sex education, human relations, or career education (in contrast, for example, to math, music or literature) have been questioned for lack of substance: they seem only indirectly related to fields of scholarship or craft in which distinguished adult achievement has been recognized. They might be more easily justified as representing standards of common adequacy. Even without tension between standards of distinction and common adequacy, controversy abounds on selection of content within a given field such as literature, history, or human relations.

Another problem is to arrive at a set of criteria for determining how well a student is doing. We may wish to strive for high distinction for all students, implying conformity to standards used by experts throughout the world. In practice, however, it would be inappropriate to hold children or beginning learners to the same standards of success applied to adults or advanced students. If different standards must be applied to different groups, how are we to establish what levels of achievement should be considered success for any given student or group?

Often distinctions are made between general levels of development such as beginner, intermediate, and advanced (e.g., the 1st, 2nd, 3rd years in the study of a language). Students are grouped into these categories, and their success is evaluated in relation to basline norms established within categories. This seems reasonable, but it leaves unresolved the question of which reference groups should supply the baselines. Persons alarmed with American students' performance in contrast to other nations suggest the need for baselines geared to an

international group of students. Others, opposed to national or international curriculum and testing, argue for locally determined standards responsive to unique goals that different communities set for their schools. Some would propose baselines reflected in an age cohort, possibly with special expectations based on students' socioeconomic class, conditions of handicap, or vocational aspirations. Still others would minimize the use of any group-based standards, emphasizing instead that each student's achievement should be described only in terms of how much the student progresses from his/her unique starting point.

Our task here is not to recommend particular baselines for judging the progress of students, to select particular curricular content for which baselines must be designed, or to resolve the tension between excellence as distinction versus excellence as common adequacy. We raise these issues primarily to show the considerable difficulty of justifying any particular standards, whether in the form of state-wide competency testing, increased requirements for academic coursework, or higher cut-off scores on admission tests. Awareness of these issues, along with the following material on excellence as a slogan, should help us understand how the quest for excellence is a two-edged sword, leading to the possible assaults on human dignity described later.

B. Excellence as a Slogan

In contemporary discourse, "excellence" works as a slogan to rally support for policies such as increased graduation requirements, increased teacher salaries, increased standardized testing, but the connection between such policies and human dignity is rarely discussed. Like most slogans "excellence" can divert attention from particular political-economic interests that benefit from reform efforts. Just as

we have learned to search for the hidden curriculum in schools, we must look for a hidden agenda in policies promoted under the banner of excellence.

Although we cannot conduct a thorough study of this point, it is possible to interpret the contemporary excellence movement as a) diverting attention from serious failures in the US economic system by blaming the school for national declines in productivity and international economic competition; b) channeling human resources into particular vocations (e.g., science, high technology) instead of others (e.g., humanities and public service); c) relieving university teachers of responsibility for teaching students who need remedial assistance; d) reinforcing the hegemony of traditional educational disciplines and the economic security of professionals who teach them; e) allocating more resources toward upper income students aspiring toward prestige colleges and universities, and fewer resources toward lower-income and minority students who need special help in mastering academic curriculum; and f) intensifying social credentialing and stratification.

Raising these possibilities invites us to scrutinize the way excellence as a slogan is used to legitimate public policy. Mandates such as course requirements or standards of testing, for example, may serve the interests of only a limited group (the advantaged, upwardly mobile and academically inclined) without promoting standards of distinction or common adequacy for others. In short, the slogan of excellence may attract support for policy mandates that actually undermine the achievement and dignity of many students.

C. The Possible Assault of Standards on Dignity

Assume that a comprehensive high school of about 1000 socially diverse students decides to eliminate many course electives, to require the academic curriculum of all students recommended by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (henceforth, the "Commission"): four years of English, three years of social studies, math and science, one-half year in computer science. It also heeds the Commission's recommendations to implement regular standardized testing of all students in these subjects and to increase academic learning time. To further support a serious climate of academic achievement, it sponsors special assemblies, awards, and study opportunities for outstanding students. Let us assume that the teachers are adequately prepared in the content of the main academic subjects required. We foresee four main ways that such a program could adversely affect many students. Our point in discussing the following problems of inauthentic standards, narrow, fragmented forms of competence, inequitable resources and egocentric striving is not to suggest that they are inevitable; but they are likely unless specific steps are taken to avoid them.

Inauthentic standards. At times the connection between the standards a student is expected to meet in school and actual mastery of a meaningful task is hard to perceive. For example, students might be required to write their thoughts on a topic in five minutes, when they need an hour to express themselves effectively; or they might be required to memorize the locations of all state capitols, when they are more curious about why their own capitol is in city A instead of B. When students must conform to standards which do not represent mastery of a valued form of competence (either in the eyes of the student or of a sensitive observer), the authenticity of these standards is brought

into question. Inauthentic standards threaten the individuality of the learner, because they deny opportunities to develop valued forms of competence. They frustrate the learner's quest for integration by demanding behavior which seems meaningless or unrelated to constructive purposes.

Students are subjected to inauthentic standards in several forms. First, knowledge or competencies are presented in ways that seem highly arbitrary or mystical; that is, the student's own experiences or powers of reasoning cannot confirm "success" or the "right answer." A teacher may require students to memorize a single definition of justice when students sense alternative reasonable definitions; a teacher might criticize a student for not perceiving the "main theme" of a play when the student found a different theme. Of course, much learning does require conformity to arbitrary conventions such as rules of spelling, punctuation, language usage, and these must be accepted. Often, however, the authority of the teacher to convey arbitrary knowledge can tread upon the reason and experience of students.

Authenticity also suffers from fragmentation in learning--when students are required to master bits of information (e.g., historical dates, scientific definitions, memorized authors and titles) and to reproduce them in isolated form without integrating them into the solution of a meaningful problem or the creation of a useful product.

Certain processes of school learning such as requiring some work to be completed with particular speed (e.g., in standard testing periods), organizing teaching into 50-minute periods, or prohibiting students from helping one another (because of rules against cheating) also violate authenticity in the development of competence.

Finally, the emphasis upon extrinsic standards such as accumulation of credits, grades, and test scores, rather than the demonstration of competence in its more natural forms (e.g., speaking; writing letters, stories, plays, research reports, editorials; performance in music, drama, athletics, completion of useful products in shop) widens the gap between the students' direct enjoyment of human mastery and the school's dominant interest in certifying it.

The problem of inauthentic standards originates not with the contemporary interest in raising standards. It has been endemic since early stages in the formalization, professionalization, and bureaucratization of education. To the extent that the current movement for excellence escalates the transmission of unnecessarily arbitrary knowledge, preoccupation with discrete, isolated competencies, the maintenance of conventional learning rituals, and the importance of extrinsic credentials, it will exacerbate the application of inauthentic standards. Policies proposed by the Commission fail to deal with this issue.

Narrow Fragmented Fields of Competence. The subjects of an academic curriculum are often considered to offer a liberal, diverse, broadening set of experiences, but there is a sense in which such subjects restrict students' exposure to human achievements. The subjects are considered to serve as a foundation for many modern activities beyond school, but their direct relevance has been consistently questioned, and they can be considered a form of "vocational" training required for those who wish to enter institutions of higher education. Academic curriculum proposed by the Commission, for example, offers few opportunities to develop manual skills of

craftsmanship, aesthetic sensitivities in music and art, physical strength and coordination, executive skills of leadership, styles of thought used in design and engineering, or approaches to care and the nurturing of others.

To the extent that academic curriculum requirements deprive students of opportunities to master alternative forms of competence, they infringe on individuality. Being forced to concentrate on "the new basics" may be necessary to get ahead, but historically, academic learning has been valued by only a small portion of the population. Commentators predict that extensive academic requirements will force large numbers of students to drop out of school, not only because they may be incapable of completing the work, but because even capable students may find this meaningless to their life goals.[9] If standards of excellence push students out of school this must be seen not only as a threat to their individuality, but in this society also as a threat to material well-being.

Proposals for new standards of competence are also narrow in the sense of maintaining a fragmented pattern of learning which frustrates human needs for integration. In high school and beyond, subjects are taught increasingly in isolation from one another--what one learns in mathematics or history is rarely applied to the other field. Competency testing and standardized achievement tests have exacerbated fragmentation in learning, as students and teachers focus increasingly upon discrete bits of knowledge that match test items. As described earlier, success in school consists largely of mastering rituals and procedures (completing work sheets, learning the rules for footnotes, taking notes according to proper outline form) that have little

intrinsic meaning, and seem for many students completely unrelated to answering questions they might consider significant.

Reports which emphasize the importance of order and discipline within the schools, the need for general education, a common core of requirements, a coherent sequence of instruction throughout twelve grades seem to respond to the importance of integration. Unfortunately, however, no major specific recommendations have been made for integrating knowledge among diverse fields. Common courses and competencies required of all give no assurance of integration among them, and the main approaches to testing tend to exacerbate fragmentation.

Inequitable resources. Although we have defined excellence as distinguished standards in a field or craft and as standards of common adequacy, we have not addressed the tension between the two conceptions. The question is whether policy should aim to generate some instances of the highest levels of human achievement possible, or to ensure a high level of common adequacy for every student. Regardless of the subject being taught, students differ markedly in the amount of time and professional resources (especially teachers' time per student) required to master a given level of proficiency. Students who require the most amount of time and resources can be defined as slow learners and those who require the least amount, fast learners. If the policy is to promote specific instances of exceptional achievement, this suggests that schooling should favor the development of fast learners, because, by definition, any given investment in them will yield higher achievements. If excellence, however, is embedded in a commitment to

equal opportunity for common adequacy, then we must pursue a policy of attaining a meaningful level of achievement for each student.

Although people wish to avoid a choice between equity and excellence, there is no way to avoid choices in the allocation of resources. Consider three conditions of resource allocation. 1) If resources are directed primarily toward fast students, we are likely to cultivate instances of exceptional achievement, but to deprive slow students of opportunities for mastery. 2) If resources are distributed equally, slow students, still operating at a disadvantage compared to fast students, will have greater opportunities, and the level of excellence among fast students will decline from the first condition. 3) If resources are directed primarily toward slow students, their opportunities to attain any given level of mastery would approach those of the fast students, but the level of excellence among fast students would be the lowest of the three conditions.

The ideal of human dignity includes a commitment to excellence, because the development of personal competence is a key requirement for a sense of worth and individuality to which all are equally entitled. According to this reasoning, the right to develop personal competence is derived from the right to equal dignity, not the reverse (i.e., competence is to be valued not as an end in itself, but as a factor critical to the more fundamental sense of individual worth). Since the commitment to equality is logically more fundamental than the pursuit of excellence, it is unjustifiable to distribute public resources for fast students to achieve exceptional accomplishment if this entails the sacrifice of resources necessary for slow learners to attain the levels of competence they require for a basic sense of worth. Condition #3 in

which slow learners receive proportionally greater levels of resources is, therefore, most consistent with the pursuit of excellence in a framework of equity.[10]

The pursuit of excellence doesn't necessarily lead to inequitably distributed resources, but recommendations such as the Commission's give little attention to this problem. Some recent reports refer to the needs of disadvantaged students, but most have worked to define what the new standards should be, not to suggest how slow learners will gain equal opportunity to master them.[11] To the extent that resources are inequitably distributed (i.e., along conditions 1 or 2) the individuality and material well-being of slow learners will be violated.

Egocentric striving. American culture has been forcefully criticized for an excess of individualism, even narcicism, and a corresponding lack of collective commitment, cooperative behavior, and social responsibility.[12] This is regrettable not because it represents the loss of a romanticized traditional community, but because it violates the dignity even of modern people, most of whom require reasonably stable social attachments in small groups and some connection with larger collective traditions. To the extent that schools raise pressures for students to prove themselves in feats of individual accomplishment, we can expect increased preoccupation with evaluative judgements of self ("how am I doing?"), and, in a competitive system, with concern over whether one can prove oneself superior to one's peer.

The concept of equal dignity is unconditional, that is, the moral worth of every individual is a given, not contingent upon one's demonstrated competence or achievement. To the extent that society tends to increase the number and importance of official ranked judgments

of individuals, the distinction between achievement and moral worth can be lost. The more we emphasize the degree of success that individuals attain (whether on standards of distinction or common adequacy) the more likely large proportions of the population in any area of achievement will consider themselves relative failures--at least half will be below "average." Successful people may experience boosts to their individual dignity, but the individuality of the failures will be threatened.

Striving toward individual achievement can also undermine social attachment and collective commitment. Persons preoccupied with individual success in the socially dominant forms of achievement have less energy for family, church, voluntary association, politics. Analyses of individual achievement in the U.S. can entail mobility from one's social roots, rather than a strengthening of them (e.g., Whyte, 1981). A forceful ethic of personal achievement may threaten parochial communal institutions such as neighborhoods, families, ethnic communities, church groups, networks of friends and political allies. But it may also undermine civic commitment to the more general public good.

If the competencies taught in school were directed toward human sharing, collaborative forms of work, and if individual achievement were promoted as an instrument of service to collective interests and the public good, striving for personal competence would do less damage to social attachment. The Commission made its case in terms of the collective national interest, but its recommendations neglect the problem that new standards will lead to an expanded set of rankings among individuals that invite strong links between achievement and moral worth. The Commission's standards for curriculum fail to address the

challenge of enhancing social attachment through families, neighborhoods, and collective traditions. Within the existing social structure, the pursuit of excellence is oriented largely toward personal aggrandizement, not to enhancing ties within communal groups nor to a broader commitment to the public good.

By emphasizing possible abuses of the current pursuit of excellence in education, we do not intend to neglect the potential for positive outcomes, since the general goal of maintaining high standards of performance in schools is consistent with the ideal of human dignity. The threats to material well-being, individuality, social attachment and integration that concern us will vary considerably, depending upon how excellence policies are implemented. The challenge for policy makers in legislative halls and schools is to devise policies that minimize threats and maximize the gains to human dignity, and we now discuss some guidelines for doing so.

V. Policy Guidelines

The Commission and other reports (e.g., Adler, 1982; Boyer, 1983) argue that the key to excellence rests in strengthening the general education or common course of study undertaken by all students. Standards for general education are proposed as increased requirements in such basics as language, mathematics, social studies, science, and decreased electives. Significant attention is devoted to the naming of courses, the amount of time to be spent in each and the general goals or competencies to be mastered. Relatively little attention is given to changing pedagogy or the institutional culture of schools. Research suggests that the imposition of new course requirements or testing

programs alone is unlikely to inspire student excitement, hard work and striving to reach high standards.[13] We would prefer, therefore, an agenda for reform that focused in more detail on the nature of effective teaching and productive school climate. We must consider, nevertheless, the new curriculum standards that recent reports choose to emphasize.

A. Diverse Forms of Competence

Educational requirements for all students tend to be justified through three main types of arguments. The proposed curriculum or competence may be considered functionally necessary for individual adjustment and survival in the society, or for social cohesion. On this basis we may require students to learn to read, to learn principles of health, to study the nature of democratic institutions. General education requirements are also advocated when considered critical to the pursuit of further learning in many fields. Mastery of basic concepts in math and science, for example, are required for further learning in numerous professional and technical fields. Finally, course requirements may be advocated largely in order to introduce students to a reasonable sample of the impressive diversity in distinguished human achievement so that students can make more informed choices about how best to direct their talents.

Any plan for general education can be questioned on each of these grounds. In considering the curriculum proposed by the Commission, for example, we might dispute whether three years of high school social studies has any effect on the way students function as future citizens. We could question whether four years in the study of English is necessary in order to learn from literature as an adult. We can ask whether the curriculum as a whole offers a sufficiently diverse

representation of human achievement to adequately expose students to human mastery. Of the three lines of argument we think the third is most neglected, and so here we concentrate on how schools might help students pursue diverse forms of competence.

The mastery of diverse forms of competence offers a foundation for individuality; meaningful choice is not possible without awareness of alternative fields. The guideline of diversity, however, must not be implemented as a set of short-term elective courses that students choose one-at-a-time. Excellence within any field requires sustained attention and depth, often with experiences structured into a sequence defined by the field, not the student. Short-term electives can, of course, offer novelty, superficial introductions to topics, and in some cases develop adequate practical competencies, but if we seek high standards, concentrated study must be preferred.

The Commission should be challenged for advocating too narrow a course of study. Although the fields of English and social studies offer opportunities for students to explore diverse forms of inquiry, defining general education as equivalent to academic curriculum is too restrictive. If students are to be adequately introduced to excellence in human accomplishment, at a minimum all should also be required to work for mastery in the arts, sports (i.e., coordination and control of the body), and the study of applied technical fields (e.g., auto mechanics, computer programming, home construction). A minimum of two semesters work in each area would seem necessary, and coursework must be developed to challenge students to work at these with the same degree of care intended in academic courses.

Effective promotion of diverse competencies cannot be accomplished through broadened general education requirements alone. To encourage students to try difficult work that they may not otherwise attempt, permission to take some courses on a pass-fail basis or to delete poor grades from grade point averages should be given. The school must also show appropriate official recognition of diverse areas through awards and honors for outstanding student achievement; display of student work in assemblies, fairs, publications, galleries. The celebration of achievement must communicate a sense of equal respect for excellence in academic courses, sports, arts, and applied technical fields. Students often develop subcultures of mutual respect within each of these areas, but school policy should aim toward official recognition and bringing isolated groups together to learn about one another's achievement.

Specialization and Tracking. To achieve excellence in the sense of high standards of performance, it is necessary eventually to concentrate one's effort in sustained ways, to specialize, or to restrict one's energies to particular fields rather than attempting to master all. Without discussing the proper age at which schools should encourage specialization, we accept the reality that it can begin at high school (even earlier), and suggest how schools could guide the process in ways consistent with human dignity.

As a general practice, high school students are placed in curriculum tracks--college preparatory, general, or vocational. Usually, the placement process is unsystematic, irregular, often a mystery to students, parents and educators, for it involves no explicit public criteria applied to all students at any particular point in time. It evolves as students are placed in classes according to their level of

ability and/or as they choose high school courses year by year. Ability grouping is based on standardized test scores, previous records of school achievement, and educators' perceptions of a student's ability. Although students and parents usually have legal right to determine what track and courses the student takes, these choices are often made without detailed examination of options, and clients usually accept educators' recommendations without question.

Tracking has been criticized and its abolition urged for several reasons.[14] It sorts students at a relatively young age into categories that have substantial impact upon their educational and occupational destiny, but through a process with ill-defined criteria over which many students have little control. It discriminates against minority and low-income students who are disproportionally excluded from the college preparatory track. The college track itself consists of one program of study aimed toward admission to highly competitive, prestige four-year colleges and universities and another aimed more generally toward higher education. Depending upon the field and quality of a school's program, students in the vocational track face vast differences in opportunities for employment and future education.[15] Many consider the general track useless, because it leads neither to higher education or to employment in technical fields.

Individuality requires opportunities for students to aim toward distinct futures based on mastery within specialized fields. Current approaches to tracking violate this principle for large numbers of students, because of the problems above and because the tracking categories (college, vocational, or general) are not oriented to specific fields of mastery. This suggests that major reform of tracking

is needed. Policy should a) strengthen general education from the beginning of elementary school so that by the time specialization decisions are made, students may choose alternative programs for reasons of authentic interest, not for lack of preparation in basic skills; b) redefine the program categories to correspond to more specific fields of competence (at times the distinction between college and non-college may be necessary, but it will almost always be insufficient for planning a useful program of specialization). c) expand guidance services to help students in concert with parents reach informed decisions about program placement; d) create continuous monitoring and program flexibility that allow students to enter and leave speciality areas at different points in their lives rather than at a standard age. Each of these guidelines is necessary to maximize meaningful choice in specialization, especially for students whose horizons may be limited by family background or gender, race and class stereotyping.

Our discussion of guidelines for diverse forms of competence has stressed both general education (all students should achieve mastery in diverse fields), and specialization (each should have opportunities to work more intensely in one area). Without prescribing a particular proportion of time to be devoted to each, we are sympathetic to the spirit of Boyer's (1983) proposal which recognizes specialization as a legitimate function of secondary schooling and which emphasizes alternatives to current tracking procedure.

B. Special Support Services

As mentioned previously, implementation of more rigorous course requirements and testing will intensify rankings among students. We are

most concerned in this section with threats to the dignity of low achievers, slow learners, and those most likely to fail to meet new standards. To respect individuality, the need for integration, and the right to material well-being, school policy must pay special attention to maximizing success for potential failures. This requires both instructional and personal support.

1. Instructional Support.

Successful strategies for enhancing the progress of low achievers will vary depending upon the subject taught (e.g., math versus carpentry versus writing), and the characteristics of students. We shall not here attempt a review of promising pedagogy, but shall first describe and then evaluate four organizational responses that tend to be used to improve instruction for less successful students.

Ability grouping. Within a subject such as algebra or American Literature, students may be grouped homogeneously by ability in that subject into separate classes.[16] Classes of slow learners move at a slower pace through less complex material. Teachers often prefer ability-grouped classes, because the narrower range of student ability seems to make teaching more manageable, and slow students need not be frustrated through competition with more successful peers.

Individualized instruction. This refers to several departures from conventional large-group instruction: the general strategy is to arrive at distinct educational objectives for each individual student, to design activities appropriate to the student's unique interests and learning style, and to monitor individual progress carefully. According to this model, a slow student within a class would receive instruction different from a fast student, but each could achieve high standards

relative to one's starting point, and neither would be adversely affected by norms of the class as a group.

Tutoring and special resource centers. Individual tutoring, special labs dealing with writing, reading, study skills, and remedial courses are targeted explicitly toward students having difficulty with a subject. Special staff and facilities are identified and reserved for the benefit of low achieving students. The main goal is eventually to master the content of regular school courses, not to substitute different content.

Alternative programs. These consist of a set of several experiences and courses, occupying a major portion of school time, and often offered by a team of staff members to a small group of students. The goal is to create an alternative learning environment to conventional school classes and to build a special morale or family feeling about the program. Frequently such programs involve community-based education, group projects, and more personal contact between staff and students than in normal classes.[17] Alternative programs may help low achievers to build special skills and self-confidence either as preparation for return to a regular school program or as self-contained entities with their own graduation credentials.

Teachers report success with each of these approaches, but it is difficult to show that any one has been generally more helpful than others in raising achievement of slow learners. Research on ability grouping has shown adverse consequences to the academic achievement and self-esteem of slow learners and also that teachers often devote less attention and effort to teaching slow learners.[18] Reports on the

effects of individualized instruction are mixed, but evidence that slow learners benefit more in heterogeneous classes may suggest support of individualized instruction within heterogeneous classes.[19] Teachers' general preference to work with fast learners suggests the need to allocate special staff resources for slow learners. This can be accomplished through tutoring and special labs which can be offered in conjunction with standard coursework in heterogeneous classes. Often, however, some students have such difficulty, even with special tutoring and lab services, that they may require a more comprehensive alternative program. Such programs can be successful, but they involve two serious dangers. They may sponsor standards of achievement so different from the main program as to deprive students of the chance to master critical skills, and they may be stigmatized as a dumping ground for failures, rather than as a unique support community where the challenge of excellence is taken seriously.

Based on the importance of allocating special staff resources for the instruction of slow learners, of aiming toward competencies of common adequacy, and of avoiding the stigma of second class citizens within a school, the preferred policy is heterogeneous grouping with ample instructional support in tutoring in special labs. Alternative programs should be attempted for students unable to succeed with this help, but they must be structured to promote competencies equivalent to the standard program, and special care must be taken to counteract adverse labeling.

Schools face another issue related to special instructional services, namely, which groups of students most deserve extra help. Pressures for special programs for low income, minority, handicapped,

women, non-English speaking students, etc. create categories for assistance that compete with one another and that may not always coincide with the large group of "low achievers" to whom we refer. Local staff within a school can probably make the most helpful judgements about which students having trouble in school deserve special help, but it may not be possible to articulate criteria for these decisions into policy acceptable to each of the constituencies mentioned above. Allocation decisions will inevitably be made that favor some groups over others in terms of per student resources, but it is more useful to argue over the areas of performance (reading, math, writing, the arts) in which all low achieving students deserve help, than to debate, for example, whether special services for the handicapped should exceed services for non-English speaking students.

Questions of trade-offs in resource allocation must be viewed in terms of a persistent historical tendency. This is the tendency of dominant interests to neglect or to oppress marginal and subordinate groups, and in effect to manage social conflict so that disenfranchised groups fight with one another over marginal resources rather than developing collective resources to challenge dominant interests. Policy-makers commonly endorse protection of minority rights and equitable distribution of resources to needy populations. However, several obstacles frustrate these goals: wealthy school districts are reluctant to share their resources with poor districts; local policy-makers tend to represent elites and to direct most resources toward their constituents rather than the disadvantaged or disenfranchised; the most able teachers prefer to work with the most able students. For these reasons even when successful instructional

procedures have been developed to maximize success for the less able, they are unlikely to be delivered with the magnitude of resources that equity requires. If the principle of empowerment discussed later can be applied with more consistency, it might enhance delivery of special instructional services as well as personal support for low achievers.

2. Personal Support.

For a number of reasons, many low achievers refuse to give the effort to schoolwork that excellence demands. Some have such a low sense of personal control or self-esteem, perceiving no hope for success in school, that they withhold effort to avoid failure. Others, especially certain minorities, may see possibilities for personal success in school, but blocked opportunities in society beyond. The perception of limited social opportunity dampens motivation to excel.[20] Still other students find the content and procedures of formal school learning, the striving for status and extrinsic rewards meaningless, without real value. Others, truly excited about schoolwork and wanting to succeed, are reluctant to give their best effort out of fear of peer group rejection. In contrast to all these explanations for low levels of effort, many low achievers try valiantly to master schoolwork, but cannot succeed in comparison to others, because of learning disabilities, psychological disruption in the home, or low native ability.

These problems may in some cases call for special forms of encouragement to raise student aspirations and to build self-confidence. In others, it may require helping a student to accept a degree of failure without devastating consequences on self-esteem. Some situations may suggest the need for extensive discussion of personal

goals, realistic opportunities, the nature of society and justice. We do not suggest specific counseling techniques for identifying and responding to low achievers. Instead we urge that a variety of policies be directed toward three main objectives. These may include, but must extend beyond, individual student conferences offered by guidance counselors, school psychologists and school social workers.

The entire school staff must participate in a climate of care and commitment to all students, regardless of their success or failure in school. This is demonstrated not simply by holding high expectations for the achievement of all, but by showing personal interest in students beyond official classroom tasks and role relationships.[21] Such interest can be demonstrated informally and also through organized communal activity (discussed below) where students and staff participate in projects with aims other than the academic achievement of individual students; for example, orientation for newcomers to the school; fundraisers; social activities.

Second, students must be given special opportunities to help one another in school through peer tutoring, peer counseling, and special student groups of women, drug abusers, and students experiencing other issues likely to interfere with learning (e.g. parental divorce or pregnancy). Staff members must be helpful in organizing and guiding these groups to make use of the tremendous resources that students can offer one another.[22]

Finally, support to alienated students must help them to articulate their own critiques of school and society. The task here is more profound than instructional tutoring. It is to invite discussion of a student's sense of injustice and negative attitudes toward authority,

society, and self. The purpose of the dialogue is to help the student reflect about personal goals and ideals in an imperfect world within an atmosphere of trust among adults. Adults must show sensitivity to alternative criteria for success, and help students identify realistically the role of school, society and students themselves in setting and achieving students' goals. Discussions of this sort must be open to conclusions that suggest the need for social as well as personal change.[23]

The Commission report gives hardly any attention to promoting special instructional and personal support for low achieving students. Unfortunately, this neglect reflects a prevailing interpretation of excellence as stimulation of higher standards for the potentially fast students, rather than equal opportunity for all students to undertake greater educational challenges.

C. Cooperative and Communal Activity

As explained earlier, schooling's emphasis on individual achievement can lead to extremes of egocentric striving, destructive to all students not only to low achievers. If schools are to serve human dignity, they must balance a preoccupation with individual achievement through support for social attachment and collective life.

Schools should involve as large a proportion of the student body as possible in activities where students contribute to goals of the school as a whole (or a to group therein) and where they enjoy group fellowship, celebration and relaxation as part of school tradition. Cooperative projects such as the production of plays, publications, remodeling homes, community service, teamwork in athletics and academic competitions, and strategies for cooperative learning in the classroom

allow students to contribute specialized competence from different areas to a common purpose. The more serious collective tasks should be complemented by activities that stimulate light-hearted communal fellowship; for example, dances, rallies, outings.

If the school is small enough for meaningful activities of this sort to occur school-wide, all the better. If not, activities can be organized around groups such as grade levels, houses, and classrooms, or around common interests that would attract students otherwise isolated from one another. The point is to bring diverse students together to build common ties and collective commitments beyond the individualistic struggle for school achievement.

Support for these activities should not be undertaken on the naive expectation that formal organizations like schools can replace or duplicate settings such as churches, neighborhoods, and voluntary associations where communal life can flourish more naturally.[24] Instead the goal is to anticipate potentially destructive consequences of egocentric individual striving and specialization that a serious pursuit of excellence may bring, and to relieve pressure from these forces through cooperative and communal activity.

D. Synthesis Activity

Our discussion of the problems of inauthentic standards and narrow forms of competence explained how standards for schooling can impede the sense of integration fundamental to human dignity. How might schools offer more integrated approaches to the pursuit of excellence? As discussed above, cooperative and communal activity is one strategy for reducing social fragmentation and enhancing intellectual integration. In addition, we consider three general strategies which may help to

integrate knowledge from otherwise isolated sources: interdisciplinary teaching; student projects; and community-based learning.

Educational history is filled with proposals for integrating the contributions of several disciplines through classes organized not according to disciplinary labels, but according to topics studied through several intellectual traditions. Courses on the environment, for example, offer opportunities to apply science, math, social studies, and English; courses on culture invite contributions from the arts, social studies and foreign languages; the study of science proceeds in part on a foundation of mathematics; and the study of literature proceeds in part on a foundation of history. English and social studies have frequently been taught together, and occasionally in middle schools teachers in math, science, social studies and English work as teams on an integrated curriculum. In spite of a constant stream of proposals for integrating diverse disciplines, the history of interdisciplinary teaching is strewn with abandoned projects. Demands to master knowledge confined within disciplinary boundaries, especially before one attempts a synthesis, and increasing specialization of knowledge in high school and beyond create substantial, often impenetrable, barriers. Nevertheless, schools must try to create opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching, both as special courses and as sections within courses. These must also attempt to rectify a selective tradition in curriculum in which the experience of historically dominated groups (e.g. women, non-whites, labor) has been consistently misrepresented.[25]

Student long-term projects, (in contrast to daily homework exercises, drill and practice activities, and tests), also offer

opportunities for students to integrate what they have learned into a piece of work that communicates more integrity or authenticity than typical pedagogical exercises. Remodeling a house, developing a written history from several sources, composing a piece of music, reading a book in a foreign language, developing a computer program for actual use, catering a banquet--all involve the synthesis of a variety of knowledge and skills into some product, service, or set of conclusions which have meaning apart from their possible instructional value for students.[26]

Projects can be conducted within the confines of discipline-based courses, but also as special tasks to synthesize knowledge from several courses. Boyer (1983) proposes, for example, that all seniors be required to conduct an independent project in which they organize knowledge from diverse sources to attack a significant problem. Gibbon's (1976) model of the walkabout program for secondary school embodied this principle. It called for students to complete projects in five areas of challenge--aesthetics, physical challenge, service, scientific inquiry, and practical challenge. Student projects have been used with much success since the beginning of the progressive education movement, but proposals for reform that focus on discrete courses and nationally standardized competencies diminish their significance.

A major aspect of fragmentation in student life is the gulf between the juvenile world of school and adult life in the community beyond school. Several analysts of socialization have criticized the segregation of youth from community life, and a variety of proposals have been offered to remedy this problem.[27] Proposals for community-based learning vary considerably in the types and quality of excellence they promote. Some emphasize opportunities to learn

vocational skills not available in schools (internships and work study programs); some offer volunteer service in social agencies such as hospitals, nursing homes, or day care centers; some send students into the community to facilitate their learning of academic subjects (e.g., through studies of plant life, law enforcement or local authors). Programs vary in the rigor of demands upon students, and it is difficult to document the effect of community-based learning on particular forms of academic achievement.[28] Nevertheless, students consistently endorse these programs as offering more meaningful work than conventional schoolwork. Most teaching will no doubt continue within the confines of school classrooms, but community-based programs offer special opportunities for students to engage in more integrated work.

E. Empowerment

If consumers have some voice in setting the standards of excellence on which they are judged and in the delivery of services to reach those standards, they should gain protection from assaults on all four aspects of dignity. Thus, the fifth general guideline for respecting the dignity of is to empower them and their parents to influence school policy, procedure and personnel. The case for empowerment of students and parents in school decisions, articulately made elsewhere, has not focused on the issue of student diversity and excellence, but on democratic rights of the citizenry to hold public institutions accountable, and we accept this principle.[29]

A variety of schemes to enhance student and parent participation in governance have been proposed, tried and studied. In spite of the extensive use of advisory councils mandated by state and Federal programs, of increased formal legal rights for students, of abundant

opportunities for voluntary input from students and parents, and even occasional systems in which students take on a major formal role in school governance, efforts to empower the clients of schooling face several obstacles.[30] Educational authorities may select elites, rather than a representative cross section of people, to participate. In good faith, authorities may seek input from a diverse cross section, but non-elite, minority, or disadvantaged students and parents fail to participate. The longer they work with the schools, advocacy groups initially representing disenfranchised constituents become transformed into service organizations for educational authorities rather than for the original constituents. Finally, even with representative and active input from a school's clientele, a majority will prevail and a minority will lose on important issues. If a group of clients is consistently in the minority, they enjoy no authentic empowerment, even within a democratic governance system.

We cannot insure the empowerment of students likely to suffer from a press toward excellence, but at least three strategies would seem consistent with this goal. First, dialogue between clients and educational authorities should be stimulated through parent conferences, advisory councils, parent-teacher organizations, student government, special hearings and school town meetings on important issues. Parents and students should have clear rights of access to school information and to appeal of school decisions regarding student selection of coursework, tracking, placement with teachers, test results grading, disciplinary actions. Many parents, especially those of low-income, are unlikely to attain effective access and influence in these proceedings unless they receive technical advice and training from advocacy

organizations independent from the school administration (Moore et al., 1983). Schools may not be expected to support such organizations, but other public agencies should.

Second, educational policy should originate with staff and clients as close to the school building as possible.[31] Ideally, even centralized decision-making at district, state, and Federal levels should be directed toward empowering clients of local school sites, but centralization usually works in the opposite direction.

Finally, schools ought to consider new governance mechanisms for protecting minorities from the tyranny of local majorities. Two formal mechanisms can, theoretically, guarantee more voice to minorities who would otherwise be overruled. Governance by consensus (or permitting veto by designated representatives) compels a group to arrive at policies acceptable to all interests. As an alternative, the right to "exit" permits a dissatisfied minority to obtain services elsewhere (Hirschman, 1970). Proponents of educational vouchers, for example, envision expanded opportunities for parents to select and create schools more consistent with their interests. Actual proposals for tuition credit or vouchers officially considered to date, however, fail to provide adequate resources for the organizational renewal that Hirschman described. If low-income families are to have either a meaningful right to transfer their children from unacceptable schools to preferred ones, or a meaningful opportunity to improve local schools from which affluent families have fled, they will require far more public resources than proposals to date have been willing to commit.

The Commission stresses the need for local involvement in schools, but such expert bodies, along with state and local policy-making

agencies who have also issued "excellence" reports exercise a subtle form of hegemony by setting the agenda for local discourse. That discourse is now likely to focus on graduation requirements, the role of testing, the compensation and evaluation of teachers, and relative levels of resource allocation to high versus low achievers. The principle of empowerment, of course, includes the right to alter the terms of discourse, and we hope that the language used here to discuss the meaning of dignity and the uses of excellence might serve that purpose.

VI. Summary

Debate on policies for excellence in education should pay special attention to the broader goal of human dignity and the equal rights of all students to material well-being, individuality, social attachment, and integration. The facts that humans differ significantly on several dimensions, that rankings of positive to negative are often made and linked to judgments of moral worth, and that societies establish norms that effectively punish those who fail to conform, create challenges for the attainment of dignity for all. The pursuit of excellence either in the form of standards of distinction or of common adequacy can serve the cause of dignity, but also assault it when inauthentic standards prevail, when narrow fields of competence are required of all, when resources are distributed inequitably between fast and slow learners, and when egocentric striving undermines social attachment.

Policy-makers at the school, district, state and Federal levels should work to minimize these destructive effects through promotion of diverse forms of competence, special support services for slow learners,

sponsoring of cooperative and communal activity in schools, stimulation of activities that help students synthesize knowledge, and the empowerment of students and parents at local school sites.

The intent of the analysis has not been to advocate specific policy directives at any particular level of decision-making, but to invite educators at all levels to consider some significant problems that may not otherwise occur to us in the frantic effort to achieve excellence in schools.

Notes

1. The criteria represent a synthesis from several lines of thought within liberal political theory and its critics (including Marxism), developmental psychology, and sociological commentary on the transition from traditional to modern culture.
2. Olneck (1979) offers one of the more recent studies showing that students who finish college have a much higher lifetime income than those who complete only high school. Historically, prior to market economies, personal income and formal schooling, families and clans offered education for material well-being through direct experience of youth in hunting, agriculture, cooking, the making of clothes, homes, and techniques of defense. Counterparts in modern schools are "courses" in health, home economics, shop, etc., but the significance placed on these is minor, because in modern culture, most aspects of material well-being are purchased with income, not developed in a self-sufficient manner.
3. Lukes (1973) offers an analysis of different aspects of individualism.
4. We agree with White (1959) that the development of competence is a fundamental human need, significant in the formation of identity, and playing a major psychological role in one's sense of intrinsic worth.
5. For diverse analyses that emphasize this point, see McWilliams (1973), Kanter (1973), Gamson (1975), Oliver (1976), Berlin (1980), Newmann (1981a), McCready (1983).

6. Newmann (1981b) reviews the relationship between theories of alienation (Schacht, 1970; Ollman, 1971; Seeman, 1972), conditions in secondary education, and reform efforts.

7. Accounts of the general range of human diversity are offered in Oliver (1976), Tyler (1965), Peterson (1982), Wallace (1970), Buss and Foley (1976), Castile and Kushner (1981), Thernstrom (1980).

8. Discussion of educational issues may focus on tolerance and cultural pluralism (Serow, 1983; Tumin and Plotch, 1977; Banks, 1981), how to respond to individual differences in learning and cognitive style (Messick, 1976; Talmage, 1975; Glasner, 1977; Good and Stipek, 1983; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1982), policies for special groups such as minority, non-English speaking, female, handicapped students, or gifted students, (Carter, 1970; Epstein, 1977; Passow, 1979; Hale, 1982), tracking or ability grouping (Rosenbaum, 1976), the political and economic control of schooling (Coons and Sugarman, 1978; Kirp, 1977; Apple, 1982). Gordon and Associates (1979) include papers on multiple aspects of diversity in education.

9. Critiques of the National Commission on Excellence pointing to its exclusive concern for academic competence include Goodman (1983), Howe II (1983), Winn (1983).

10. This position relies to a large degree on Rawls' (1971) theory of justice in which inequalities must be justified on the basis of their benefits to the least advantaged members of the society. In concentrating on the relationship between general standards of excellence for curriculum and human dignity, we have not explored the complex meaning of equal educational opportunity as it has

evolved in America; for example, the distinction between equality of resources versus equality in the effects of schooling; the attempt to make educational achievement and attainment independent of social background, or specific criteria on which inequalities in resources and outcomes can be justified. Sources such as Coleman (1968), Ashline et al (1976), Kirp (1977), and Green (1980, 1983) offer helpful reviews of these issues.

11. Adler (1982) emphasizes the need for remedial instruction so that low achievers learn to master the fundamentals of general education. Boyer (1983) stresses expansion of guidance services and more adequate assessment of students' interests, achievements and progress. The College Board (1983) and the National Commission on Excellence (1983) emphasize special efforts to help disadvantaged students, but propose no major policies toward this goal. The Twentieth Century Fund (1983) makes a case for continued Federal support of disadvantaged students, but concerns itself primarily with funding issues rather than the specific ways in which resources are used.

12. MacPherson (1966), Lasch (1978), Cagan (1978), Kelly (1979), Butts (1980), and Yankelovich (1981) make this point from diverse theoretical perspectives.

13. For examples of studies that show how the complexity of school life complicates the implementation of new curriculum standards, see Berman and McLaughlin (1978) Popkewitz et al (1982); Purkey and Smith (1983); Cusick (1983).

14. For important critiques of tracking, see Rosenbaum (1976), Persell (1977), Goodlad (1983).

15. Woods and Hainey (1981) and Benson (1981) document differences between males and females, between programs such as office versus industrial trades, and between institutions such as comprehensive versus specialty schools.

16. Ability grouping frequently refers to dividing students within a class into separate groups, a familiar practice at the elementary level, especially in the teaching of reading. At the secondary level, a more frequent practice is to create separate sections or classes to minimize the range of ability with which teachers must cope in a given period. Often classes grouped by ability in high school also reflect curriculum tracking (fast learners are programmed into college prep courses, slow learners into vocational courses, and the groups learn different material even in standard courses required of all, such as American history or American literature.)

17. Examples of such programs for marginal students are reported by Weis and Hawkins (1979) and Wehlage et al (1982).

18. See Rosenbaum (1980); Schwartz, (1981), Good and Marshall, (in press).

19. Bangert et al (1983) found no consistent advantages of individualized instruction at the secondary level. As critiques by Berk (1979), Carroll (1978), Popkewitz et al (1982), and Tobias (1982) have shown, the state of knowledge in this area and the culture of schools present tremendous problems in matching instruction to students' individual styles of learning.

20. Ogbu (1978) shows the effect of these perceptions on black students.

21. Teachers who teach the "whole" child or who function in extended, rather than limited roles are likely to communicate more support (Newmann, 1981b; Berlak and Berlak 1981, Conrad and Hedin, 1981; Wehlage, 1982).

22. The value of student self-help groups has been described by National Commission on Resources for Youth (1974), Mosher, (1979), National Institute on Drug Abuse (1981).

23. This calls for radical dialogue as discussed by Friere (1970) and Shor (1980).

24. See Oliver (1976) and Berger and Neuhaus (1977) regarding the distinction between public service bureaucracies such as public schools and mediating structures or communal institutions.

25. On the selective tradition in curriculum, see Anyon (1979), Apple (1979) and Williams (1977).

26. As early as 1918 the "project method" was discussed professionally in the U.S., and it has been used, studied and advocated continuously (Krug, 1972; Gibbons, 1976).

27. Coleman (1974), Havighurst and Dreyer (1975), Carnegie Council (1979).

28. Studies of the effects of different forms of community based learning have been completed by Hamilton (1980), Kelly (1980), Conrad and Hedin (1981), Owens (1982), Newmann and Rutter (1983).

29. See Levin (1970), Fantini (1973), and the comprehensive bibliography by Davies and Zerchykov (1978) for a variety of perspectives on empowerment of parents.

30. For descriptions of problems mentioned below see Lightfoot (1978), Gittell (1980), Wright (1982).

31. Studies of education reform and effective schools consistently endorse the importance of local school site management (Purkey and Smith, 1983; Goodlad, 1983).

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